

Tabletop Exercise Offers Media Inside Glimpse of Bioterrorism Response

Wichita-area media and local, state, and federal agencies experienced together what would happen in response to a bioterrorism attack at a large indoor venue. “Coliseum Chaos,” a media workshop and tabletop exercise, held at the Wichita Downtown Hyatt on Feb. 3, offered “Just-in-Time Training” on the cooperation necessary to protect Kansans after an attack with a biological weapon.

Mike Cameron and Sharon Watson, KDHE Public Information Office staff, represented the agency at the workshop.

The exercise, sponsored by the Sedgwick County Health Department Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) and the Kansas SouthCentral Metro Region Health departments, was designed by Texas A&M University – National Emergency and Response Center. The scenario of the exercise focused on the release of anthrax at the Kansas Coliseum during a concert by the “famous rock star,” Elmore James.

Prior to the exercise, guest speaker Sam Gonzales, retired police chief of Oklahoma City, enlightened participants with “The Oklahoma City Bombing: Blueprint for Preparedness.” His presentation offered a unique insider’s view of the recovery efforts and media coverage following the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in 1995.

The 110 participants included media and local public health, public safety, emergency management and hospital personnel from Butler, Cowley, Harper, Harvey, Marion, Reno, Sedgwick, and Sumner Counties. State agencies participating included: Kansas Department of Emergency Management, Kansas Highway Patrol, and KDHE. Representatives from federal agencies included: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and McConnell Air Force Base Fire and Emergency Services personnel.



Sedgwick County officials ponder their next move after receiving an update from one of the exercise facilitators from Texas A&M University.

The tabletop exercise began with the discovery by a maintenance worker of a white, powdery substance that had been placed in an air duct in the Kansas Coliseum during a concert attended by 13,080 fans and 500 support staff. The scenario, played out in

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compressed time, demonstrated the coordinated efforts needed between agencies at all three levels to locate and provide medical treatment for the concert-goers, as well as anyone they came in contact with following the concert. Law enforcement officials also demonstrated the cooperation needed to preserve evidence and locate, arrest, and prosecute the suspected terrorists.

The attendees from print, radio, and TV media outlets learned how important their role would be in assisting in the effort to inform the public of the attack and where to go to get the necessary medication, without causing panic. Public information personnel also were given a chance to test their risk communications skills by writing news releases, public service announcements, and participating in live and telephone news conferences.

“To our knowledge, the concept of conducting a tabletop exercise directly with the media, had not been accomplished until now. In our initial research efforts, we contacted various agencies and consultants at the local, state, and federal level to determine if something of this magnitude had been attempted,” said Gloria Vermie, RN, MPH, Sedgwick County MMRS & Public Health Emergency Management.

“We recognized the need to do this for the media. Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security – MMRS, enabled us to make this happen. Our regional partners from the Kansas SouthCentral Metro Region assisted with funding as well. Without the support and partnership from the media, various local, state and federal agencies, hospitals, first responder agencies, and others, we could not have achieved the success we experienced.”